

# Postal worker speaks on USO reform pilots: “A tripartite attack on jobs by Royal Mail, Ofcom and the CWU”

**Our correspondent**

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*The World Socialist Web Site spoke with Ian, a postal worker from the north-west of England who is a member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC). Ian spoke about the “USO reform” announced by regulator Ofcom and being implemented by Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) through a pilot scheme from February-May.*

*The Universal Service Obligation (USO) is the statutory requirement that Royal Mail deliver letters to every address in the UK, six days a week, at a uniform price.*

*Ian explains why a fightback must be organised against the CWU’s collusion with the dismantling of the USO, ushering in mass job destruction and further entrenchment of gig economy conditions, described euphemistically as the “Optimised Delivery Model (ODM)”.*

*The PWRFC is calling for workplace meetings to block Royal Mail’s USO reform pilot scheme agreed by CWU officials. The pilots are a dress rehearsal for a £300 million cost-cutting drive demanded by new owners EP Group led by billionaire Daniel Kretinsky.*

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**WSWS:** Documents circulated by the CWU on the “Optimised Delivery Model” at 37 pilot offices include a table titled, “Example route coverage under our proposal”. Royal Mail currently has a structured duty pattern where delivery workers are assigned to a walk. How does the ODM change these working practices?

**Ian:** It will displace postal workers from their usual duties. The CWU now calls walks “combined and core”. The reduction in workers covering these duties means walks will be lost. ODM will also result in a reorganisation of postal workers’ duties through a ‘repick’. All duties are to be reassigned on a seniority basis to workers. Any workers who are surplus will be

deployed wherever is required.

**WSWS:** The ODM table divides routes into “core” and “combined”, with three delivery workers having to perform the work of four. It shows “Evie” having to do two routes of first class and parcels. How will this impact on workloads?

**Ian:** The timing of this huge change is happening during a traditional lull in the work. The CWU already claims the workload has been achieved in the first trial office. Many postal workers are already undertaking this type of work but the combined routes are tough to achieve. Many achieve targets by “carving the job up”: no breaks, no van checks, doorstepping, driving illegally. Workers who do the job properly cannot complete.

The CWU has revealed that the only way the core routes have completed is by having help indoors. They will also be carving the job up. Working illegally is fully condoned and rewarded by allowing workers to go home early. Delivery workers on the latest contracts are being denied their legal right to a break during their working time.

**WSWS:** How misleading is it that the Optimised Delivery Model refers to “alternate day delivery” of second class and non-priority letters?

**Ian:** The core routes are not an alternative day model, and Martin Walsh [CWU Deputy General Secretary] has admitted that. Some mail will be delayed by two days, with the weekend creating the biggest delay. This will result in mail that the customer considers important being delayed in getting to them. Workloads for core duties will be excessive on a Monday and Tuesday.

For example, the table shows that on Saturday four routes of just first-class letters and parcels will be completed by two delivery workers in vans. But what is the impact on workloads?

Workloads for both the core and combined routes will

be difficult to achieve in the time workers are given every day. The biggest impact is on workers who will be surplus to requirements as a result of the ODM. There are not enough duties on a Saturday for everyone.

**WSWS:** With three delivery workers covering four routes, and then two performing four routes on Saturday, what type of job losses do you think are being prepared behind closed doors between Royal Mail and the CWU?

**Ian:** For a start, ODM reduces jobs by 25 percent. The potential job losses are huge, in the thousands.

We also face the very real attack of a two-tier workforce. ODM is happening whilst postal workers are on two very different contracts. The CWU only seeks an “equalisation” of contracts, which under the ODM means levelling in a downward direction. Job losses and worse terms and conditions.

**WSWS:** How is the CWU using the promise of additional Saturdays off to push through this overturn of structured duty patterns? Walsh is talking about improving “work-life balance”.

**Ian:** It’s smoke and mirrors. The rotation options are fatiguing and regressive. Workers face rota patterns that break up quality time off. It appears that part-time workers will face serious disruption to their working lives. One rota pattern requires part-time workers to work split weeks. It is certainly no victory.

**WSWS:** How do you respond to the claims by CWU officials that fatigue will be managed and “reasonable workloads” established?

**Ian:** The CWU has failed to ensure safe and healthy work full stop. Lip service is paid to basic health, safety and welfare laws. A simple example is the lack of control of manual handling. Workers suffer numerous injuries from the work that could be easily controlled but are badly managed. The work will be no safer under ODM.

**WSWS:** [CWU leader] Dave Ward speaks about Royal Mail being part of the “social fabric”, a connection between the postie and the public they directly serve. Does this model sever that connection and push postal workers further down the road of an Amazon-style parcel service?

**Ian:** ODM is focused on profit. There is no time for the basic interaction between the worker and the customer. Workers are monitored to the second via their handheld PDA devices, so spending time with customers beyond the basic interaction is impossible. The disconnect will only increase with workers who have no familiarity with the routes they are assigned to.

**WSWS:** What do you think about Ofcom’s support for Royal Mail’s Optimised Delivery Model and the CWU’s embrace of “USO reform”?

**Ian:** It’s a tripartite attack on workers’ jobs. They are facilitating and empowering each other. Ofcom are the instigators in the drive for profit from letters, IDS [Royal Mail parent group] are the instigators in the drive for profit from parcels, and the CWU fuels the drive for all of the parties involved. Ultimately Ofcom should be stripped of their role in the race for profits. It’s not the role of a regulator to create profit by scrapping jobs.

**WSWS:** Do you see any other way of opposing this without a rank-and-file organisation against the CWU bureaucracy, and how do you see that developing?

**Ian:** Workers should be alerted to the amount of money that the postal industry creates. It’s billions of pounds. Postal workers receive a tiny amount of that money for their labour, and they should be demanding more.

Alongside reclaiming our real share of the billions taken by the major shareholders, we should be fighting for more jobs to create a safe and healthy work environment. Our work is not an “unfair financial burden” on the company, as claimed by Ofcom. It is a proud and honest occupation that should be generously remunerated.

Postal workers face an immediate future that will result in the destruction of their jobs, and worse terms and conditions.

Workers are not alone in their opposition to the ODM plan. They should organise themselves both inside and outside the CWU. Workplaces can hold their own committees where they should demand their CWU representatives oppose the tri-partite attack on postal workers.

Workers should join the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee. No one is alone in opposing this hated new way of working. We can and will stop it.



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